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BLM Alaska
FRONTIERS

News about BLM-managed public lands in Alaska

ISSUE 86 FALL 2002

Another NPR-A lease sale exceeds expectations

The 63-million-dollar question(s)

BLM's second oil and gas lease sale in the northeast corner of the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A) generated $63.8 million in bonus bids on 60 tracts covering 579,269 acres. That's a considerable sum even though the sale comes in the wake of Phillips Alaska's announcement of promising discoveries on five of six wells drilled between 2000 and 2001. The prior lease sale generated about $104 million on 133 tracts on 867,000 acres in 1999.

Phillips Alaska and Anadarko Petroleum, the companies most active in the reserve, added to their holdings. British Petroleum, which has announced plans to concentrate on developing its existing leases, did not participate.

The big surprise came with the intensity of interest from two new players, EnCana Oil and Gas (USA), Inc., based in Calgary, Alberta, and TotalFinaElf E&P USA. TotalFinaElf, the fifth largest oil company in the world and based in Paris, submitted the six highest bids of the sale and aggressively spent $53 million that accounted for 83 percent of the total dollars raised by the sale. EnCana spent nearly $1 million bidding on five tracts. BLM officials have met recently with representatives of both companies to get acquainted.

What happens next? What will be the impact of this sale on the nation's energy supply and the Alaska economy, not to mention the state budget? What will be the impacts on the North Slope, its resources and people? And how will

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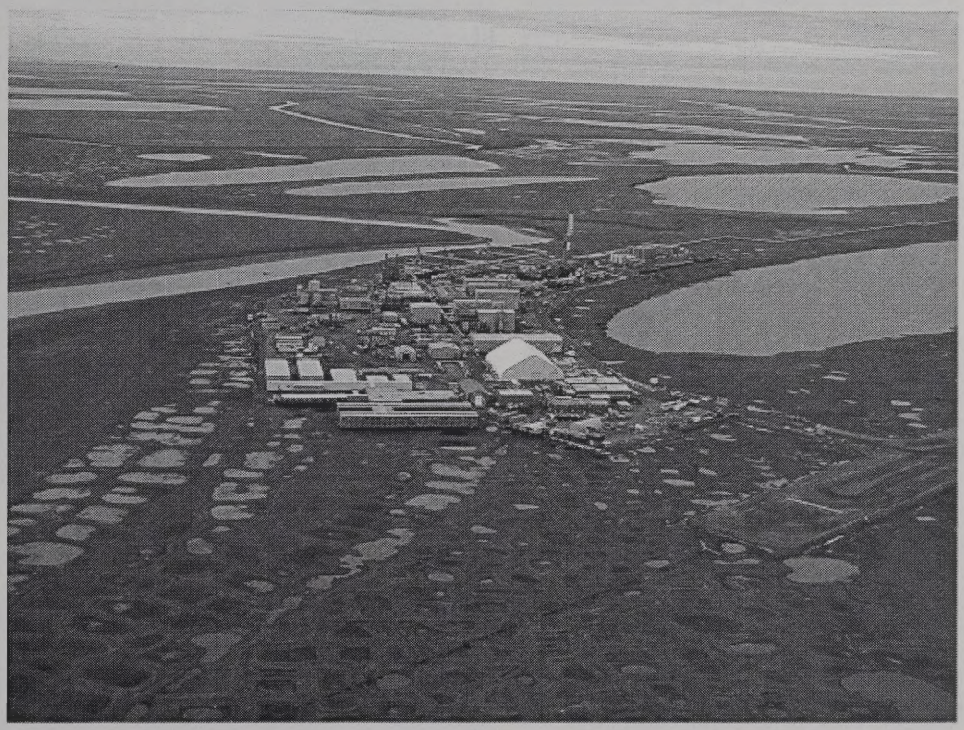

The nearby Alpine field is often mentioned as the model for NPR-A development. But will technology change the face of development in yet another, new direction?

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NPR-A, *continued from page 1*

this sale affect BLM staffing and programs? These are just some of the questions raised by the sale. Some of the answers are readily available but some answers will be years in coming.

What about the money?

Currently a bid assessment team composed of geologists, geophysicists and economists is in the final stages of analyzing the bids. BLM must accept or reject bids within 90 days of the sale, September 3. Winning bidders will have 15 days from notification of acceptance to make payment in full for their bonus bid as well as their first year's lease rental. BLM could collect as much as $1.9 million annually while the leases are active.

Proceeds are deposited in the U. S. Treasury. However, 50 percent of both the bonus bids and the annual lease rentals is shared with the State of Alaska. Payments are made to the state on a semiannual basis following receipt of the money, typically in either October or April. An Interior Department appropriations act passed in 1980 directs the state government to "give priority to use by subdivisions of the state most directly or severely impacted by development of oil and gas leased" in the reserve.

These two recent NPR-A lease sales also have generated a high level of interest in Washington. NPR-A is prominently mentioned in the national energy plan. Last March, Kathleen Clarke, BLM's new national director, visited NPR-A winter drilling operations. This summer, Rebecca Watson, the assistant secretary for lands and minerals, and other Interior Department officials also visited.

All this bidding, exploration and interest will affect BLM and the North Slope. "For starters, just look at the oil and gas budget for BLM's Northern Field Office. In 1988 the district budget for oil and gas was about $4,000; for FY 2002 it's $265,000 plus $1.7 million for special projects," says BLM Northern Field Manager Bob Schneider.

But will the new lessees and the work they generate overwhelm BLM? Schneider says cutbacks by BP will free up time for servicing the new leases but "if the bidding is any indication of the level of seriousness, we could get very busy."

More work for BLM?

BLM-Alaska is meeting the challenge by a combination of contracting out some work, hiring additional staff and "working smart."

Some of the biggest help comes from the Minerals Management Service. Its Alaska staff was essential to completing the environmental impact statement (EIS) for four million acres in the northeast corner of the NPR-A in less than two years. MMS is now under contract for producing a companion EIS for ten million acres in the northwest portion of the NPR-A. Other contractors in private industry completed the environmental analyses needed for the first three winter exploratory drilling programs.

August typically is a busy time as companies prepare for the winter drilling season. Don Meares, a BLM natural resource specialist in Fairbanks, usually gets the call to "stake" specific locations where companies plan to drill exploration wells. But Meares says he is expect-

BLM hires more staff for NPR-A work

BLM-Alaska's Northern Field Office filled four new positions this past April for work in NPR-A.

Hydrologist **Richard Kemnitz** transferred from the U.S. Geological Survey and will work on studies of lakes and streams.

Natural resource specialist **Derek Huebner** moved here from Wyoming to help with oil and gas compliance work.

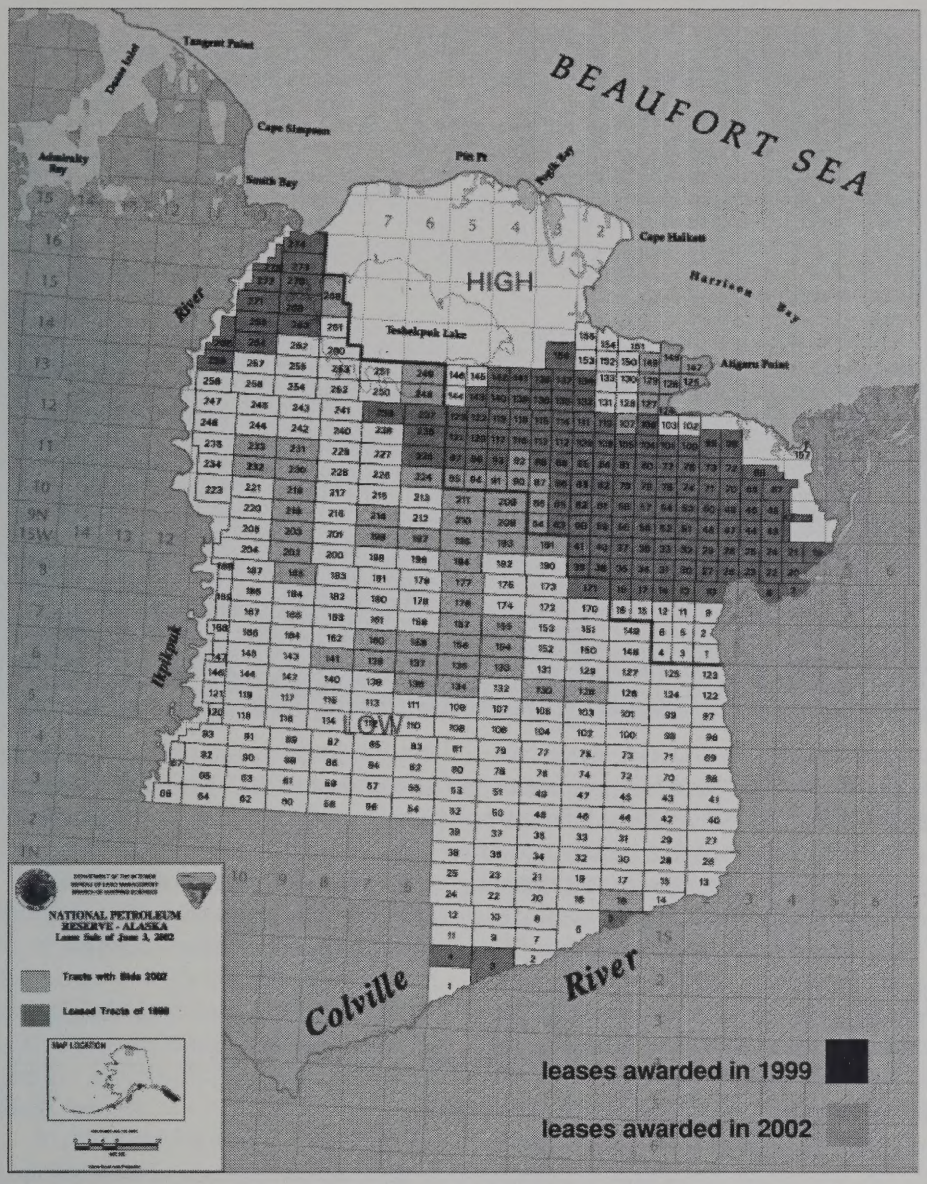
Alison Boyce is a new administrative assistant. She previously worked for the U. S. Department of Agriculture in Fairbanks.

Anthropologist **Stacie McIntosh** got her masters degree from UAF in 1999. She will focus on subsistence-related projects in NPR-A.

BLM also plans to fill a new position for wildlife biology in the near future.

Edward Bovy

One lesson learned from three seasons of exploratory drilling is that there are limits to how far ice roads can provide access. How will companies be able to explore the new leases farther to the west?



ing only a few, if any, notices to be filed this year. "BP is not active at all, Anadarko probably won't do any new wells on their own this season, and Phillips has already received approval for multi-year projects. As for the new lessees, they will likely need at least a year to complete summer assessment work that is necessary for environmental analysis."

Exploration challenges

But that just covers 2002. Meares notes that many of the new leases will be in areas geographically far removed from the existing leases and that BP's exploration has revealed there are limits to ice road construction. He anticipates future drilling proposals will require new methods such as storing the rigs on special ice pads that can last all summer rather than haul them off site; this is actually being tested this year at Puviag. "This could be the wave of the future," he said.

Another new trend is to keep looking for new discoveries while developing current ones quickly for cash flow. Development then finances the work of looking for new discoveries. This means that BLM should expect to receive a proposal for the development of a field west of Nuiqsut based on the discoveries of the last three years. When that occurs, it will trigger the preparation of another environmental impact statement. And while the nearby Alpine field is considered state-of-the-art and is often looked to as the model for what to anticipate in NPR-A, technology is changing rapidly and Meares speculates that any full field development there could be on a smaller scale.

Anadarko recently disclosed it is developing a new form of drilling platform based on offshore designs that will not require a gravel pad or ice roads. BLM is also working smarter. "We developed a somewhat generic memorandum of understanding for documents that could be used in environmental assessments and environmental impact statements. We had input from three companies currently working in NPR-A. It should work for the new companies as well. It's already been reviewed by our solicitor so it doesn't have to be continuously re-reviewed by lawyers," says Meares.

Logistics is another area where BLM can improve, says Schneider. "We can reduce costs and impacts to the environment if we can develop some areas for supporting infrastructure, areas that we can share with industry such as landing strips, fuel and materials storage and even places to keep people out of the weather," he said.

BLM has already shifted some people and dollars to the 10 million acres west of the Ikpikpuk River now under study in an upcoming EIS. The draft is scheduled to be released in the fall and information will appear in the next edition of *BLM Alaska Frontiers.*

—Edward Bovy

Public hearings on EIS for trans Alaska pipeline renewal conclude. The Joint Pipeline Office held six pubic meetings around the state. The public comment period closed August 20. Comments will be analyzed and responses will be included in the Final Environmental Impact Statement to be published this fall. Watch for details in the next issue of *BLM Alaska Frontiers.*

Gulkana River fish survey underway

KJ Mushovic

Austin Mahalkey waits to count fish passing across the white strip of tarpaulin in the lower left foreground.

The last issue of *BLM Alaska Frontiers* mentioned that a State of Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) fish counting tower project for the Gulkana River had been challenged in a court appeal. Despite some concerns, the project was able to move forward and is now underway.

Two towers were constructed on two channels of the Gulkana River upstream from the confluence with the West Fork. ADF&G personnel, assisted by seasonal Glennallen Field Office staff and volunteers, spent most of the summer perched in one or the other tower, scanning white tarpaulins stretched across the river channel for a glimpse of passing fish.

"We don't count continuously," explained ADF&G employee Austin Mahalkey in July. "We spend ten minutes at each of the two stations every hour. We estimate the population based a formula applied to the actual number of fish observed." The fish counters were assigned to the tower site for two-week stints and divided their days into eight-hour shifts to ensure round-the-clock coverage. Although the target species were chinook (king) salmon, all fish crossing the tarpaulins were noted.

"They seem to travel more at night," observed Mahalkey. "They don't seem to like the tarp. They'll cross anywhere, but seem to prefer crossing where the water is deeper." It came as no surprise to learn that the cautious fish moved through the shallower side channel less often than the main channel.

"We've had 6,000 fish pass the towers," ADF&G Glennallen Fisheries Biologist Tom Taube told BLM State Director Henri Bisson at the end of July, during an informal briefing on the project, "And we counted 2,000 in our annual aerial survey." The good weather may have been a factor in the number of fish counted during the aerial survey, but it appears that 2002 has seen the best escapement since 1998. An avid angler, Bisson listened with interest as Taube described the project. "Our goal with the towers is to establish a biological escapement goal for chinook salmon for the Gulkana," explained Taube.

—KJ Mushovic

Why the Gulkana?

About 25 percent of all Copper River salmon are believed to spawn in the Gulkana River or its tributaries, making it the most important spawning grounds for both Copper River salmon (kings and reds). The Gulkana stocks also support sport, commercial and subsistence fisheries. To ensure healthy and sustainable stocks, ADF&G must first ensure adequate escapement (non-harvested fish that "escape" to spawn), before attempting to meet the needs and desires of each of the fisheries. Accurate counts are essential to help estimate the total population, establish a biological escapement goal (BEG), and then determine what remaining stocks can be allocated to each type of harvest.

In the past, fishery managers have relied on aerial "index" estimations of escapement in Copper River tributaries by counting fish from the air annually during the last two weeks of July. While this method can be valuable in monitoring trends, increasing harvests, allocation issues and concerns regarding sustainability dictated the need for a more precise method. As one of the major Copper River salmon spawning tributaries, the clearwater Gulkana River offers an ideal location to conduct a counting project, especially the selected site, upstream of the often muddying influence of the West Fork tributary, across fairly narrow, shallow channels. The project is expected to continue through the summer of 2006 when it will be reevaluated for possible continuation.

Driving Denali

Resource advisory council looks at resources along scenic highway corridor

Dennis Green

There are dozens of good reasons to visit the Denali Highway and only one bad one: that moment when you must leave the spectacular alpine scenery behind to return to whatever city or town you call home.

BLM's resource advisory council spent two very full days touring the Denali Highway, the 135-mile unpaved road between Paxson and Cantwell, in late July. Members left with images of hardy wildflowers, breathtaking alpine ridges, and abundant wildlife, including a large group of Nelchina caribou leisurely browsing south of the highway near Tangle Lakes.

But just as important as these images is the knowledge they took back with them, facts gleaned from discussions with BLM resource specialists and from conversations with local residents and business owners affected by the decisions BLM makes.

BLM State Director Henri Bisson and Glennallen field manager Ramone McCoy were joined by Bob Loeffler, director of the State of Alaska's Division of Mining, Land and Water Management, and the division's permitting program manager, David Kelley. This group accompanied nine members of BLM's advisory council on a tour of the highway to look at a stabilization project at Middle Fork Trail *(see story on page 8)* and a number of interpretive waysides and campgrounds in the area.

Later that evening, BLM geologist Peter Bittenbender provided an overview of the mineral assessment work BLM is doing along the Denali. He discussed the importance of surveying, mapping and sampling the known and suspected mineral deposits in the area. "We also talk to local prospectors, the ones who've worked this area for decades, to get that local knowledge about deposits," Bittenbender added.

This information will be analyzed and published for use by industry groups and others interested in doing exploration work in the area.

Dennis Green

Soil scientist Kevin Meyer explains to council members how plastic matting called Geoblock stabilizes damaged trail segments along Middle Fork Trail.

The following morning, BLM archeologist John Jangala met with the group to talk about the importance of the Tangle Lakes Archaeological District. He explained the need for inventory and study of the area: "This area has some of the densest concentrations of archaeological sites in the subarctic, some dating back to 11,000 years."

Jangala explained the need to protect these prehistoric reminders of the past for further study, and why BLM has restricted off-road vehicle travel to designated roads and trails until further archaeological clearances are done.

Jack Johnson, owner of Tangle River Inn, expressed his frustration about trail closures and how the closures put more pressure on the remaining open trails. "I've used these trails for 50 years and now I'm told I can't until you do your studies. What I need to know is, will the trails be opened back up in my lifetime, or my children's?"

Jangala said agencies must follow specific guidelines in areas of known archaeological sites, and sometimes this means restrictions to protect those resources until they can be adequately studied. He explained that methods archaeologists use today to study and date artifacts yield more information than twenty years ago, and twenty years from now new methods will yield even more valuable information.

Bisson said he understood Johnson's frustration. "Basically, we have to keep trail restrictions in place until the proper archaeological clearances are done, and that comes down to funding. We have to find that balance of how much protection

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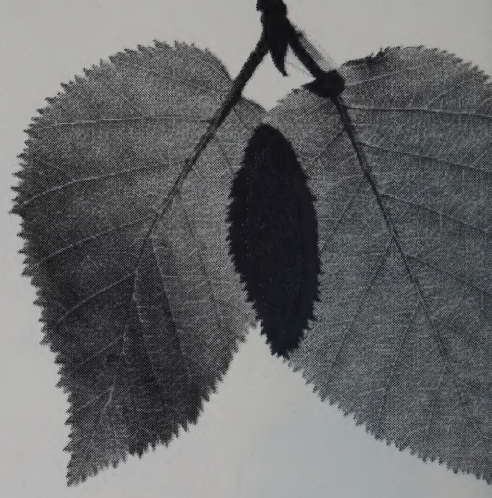
Is Autumn Alaska's Shortest Season?



Photography by Dennis Green

When people think of the Alaska gold rush, it brings to mind images of the prospectors, the Klondike, and possibly even the beaches of Nome. But there's another side of gold—the natural color of the birch, willow and aspen found throughout Interior and southcentral Alaska each autumn.

Alaska's autumn doesn't get anywhere near the attention that New England does. And "leaf peepers" head to places like Colorado and Montana in greater numbers as well. Few of them would ever consider Alaska a fall color destination.

Autumn comes early to Alaska bringing a blazing blast of color before the stark black-and-white reality of winter takes over the landscape. So many trees change at once that the effect on Alaska's public lands is visually staggering. If you know where to go, not only your eyes but also your nose and mouth are in for a treat.

While the Lower 48's east coast, south and desert southwest are suffering through their hottest days of the year, Alaska is already cooling off. Lisa Jodwallis, a BLM interpretive specialist stationed at Coldfoot, says that the fall colors begin in mid-August north of the Brooks Range. Overnight lows dipped into the 20's the week of August 12. But this is tundra country so the colors paint the ground as the plants burst into uncountable shades of red, orange, and yellow. Other than a few willows, you won't find any trees in the far north.

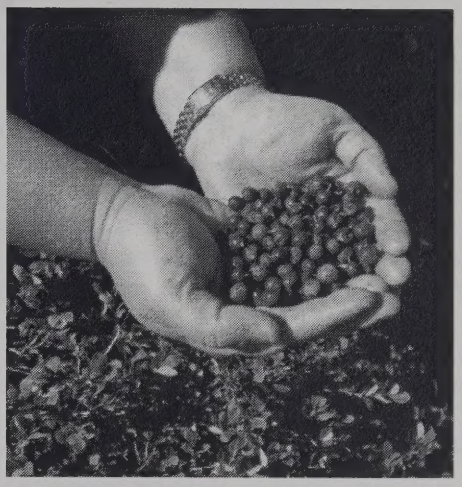
Nature quickly moves her paint pallet south. "When the colors are at their peak in Coldfoot, you go up to the North Slope and they're done with up there, they're gone. You experience the change in season just by going north up the highway a few miles from here," says Jodwallis.

Shelly Jacobson, a BLM natural resource specialist in Fairbanks, likes the tundra colors around the Pinnell Mountain Trail near Eagle Summit on the Steese Highway. She says, "When the ridge tops turn red, that's really pretty." Drive northeast of Fairbanks in late August.

If autumn lingers too long in Fairbanks, it's trouble. A few years ago the leaves didn't drop fast enough. They were still green when an early, wet snow hit town. It weighted the birch branches down, snapping them off and severing power lines.

By early September, the Fortymile country is a gorgeous blend of yellow and gold. Stop at any overlook on the way to Dawson and you'll be treated to vistas of yellow-painted rolling hills that simulate waves to the horizon.

Larry Taylor, a member of BLM's Resource Advisory Council, and his wife, June, have lived in the Fortymile country for 32 years. "Fall begins here about a week before it starts in Fairbanks. Colors peak at the end of August and for a short time in September. We're always hopeful for a long fall season. The air is crisp, clean, clear and smells different than any other season," says June. "The best place to see the fall colors is along the river. It's unbelievably beautiful to float down on a sunny day and see all the colors reflected in the water. There are golden-colored birch trees, red blueberry bushes and orange aspen that all contrast with the dark green spruce trees," she added.



While you enjoy the colorful displays of vegetation, don't forget that fall brings its own special tastes and smells as well.

Another favorite of the Taylors is mile 105 and 139 of the Taylor Highway where "the view goes on forever, the tundra and low bushes are bright red and on the distant horizon you can see the snow-dusted mountain peaks."

The Denali Highway between Paxson and Cantwell offers its own beauty. Open vistas around miles 85 to 95 showcase bright red and gold colors with the snowcapped peaks of the Alaska Range providing a dramatic backdrop. Mid-to late August is a good time to pick wild blueberries for an extra treat.

Southcentral Alaska has its own hot spots. The Glenn Highway between Palmer and Eureka summit is hard to beat. Here the Matanuska River cuts through the dark shales of the Talkeetna Mountains, tempting the photographer to capture the contrast of the yellow leaves against a black background or a deep blue sky.

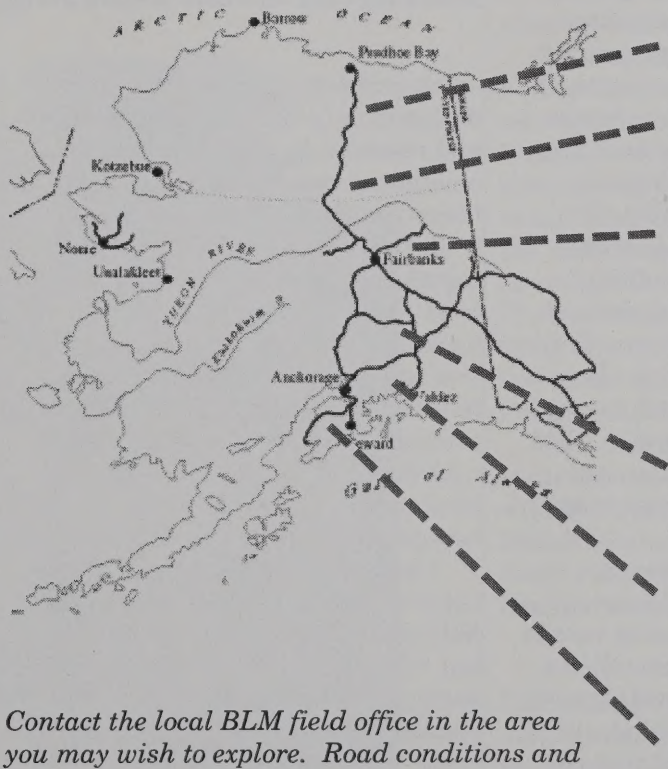
Anchorage residents can head to BLM's Campbell Tract for one last look around before the snow, skiers and dog mushers arrive. Typically the last two weeks in September are best for color.

Interior residents who are sad to see their colors leave can extend their fall by heading down to the Kenai Peninsula where fall lingers a bit longer, perhaps squeezing another two weeks of color into Alaska's shortest season.

Meanwhile the higher elevations of the Dalton, Steese, and Taylor highways are likely to be daubed with the color white, announcing the start of another winter.

—Edward Bovy

Now is the time to hit the road for fall colors



North of Brooks Range
mid August

Dalton Highway south of Brooks Range
mid to late August

Steese and Taylor highways
late August

Fairbanks
late August to mid September

Denali Highway
late August to early September

Glenn Highway
mid September

Anchorage
mid to late September

Kenai Peninsula
late September to mid October

Contact the local BLM field office in the area you may wish to explore. Road conditions and weather are changeable, so be prepared and then enjoy one last adventure before winter changes your options.

Middle Fork Trail tests new technology

Repeated travel across wetland-area soils usually results in water-collecting ruts that turn routes into small streams, ponds and bogs. In response, trail users often move to undisturbed areas next to the rutted route, creating a "braided" trail that collects more water from natural drainages, spreading the problem.

The National Park Service (NPS) Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, BLM's Glennallen District, and the Copper River Watershed Project recently completed an experimental demonstration of new trail stabilization technologies on the Middle Fork Gulkana River Trail (sometimes referred to as the Meiers Lake Trail) at Mile 169 of the Richardson Highway.

This summer, trail crews staffed by the three organizations worked for two weeks rebuilding the first 4,000 linear feet of the notorious trail in a cooperative response to cross-jurisdictional resource issues. The core funding for the demonstration project was a $30,000 State Recreation Trail Grant (TRAAK Grant). Funding for the grant is based on a federal tax on off-highway vehicle use which is disbursed to all states. The NPS Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program was the recipient and manager for the grant and teamed with BLM and the Copper River Watershed Project to provide staff, equipment and do the job.

On the Middle Fork project, crews routed the trail onto more stable soils and used existing ruts to create drainage ditches, installed a geotextile fabric covered with gravel on some sections, and used plastic porous "pavement" panels that can be interlocked to create a protective surface that bridges wet areas while letting vegetation grow through the pores. The panels, resembling a small-gridded pallet, were originally designed to be backfilled with topsoil and reseeded to provide a lane for emergency response vehicles over lawns in urban areas. About 1,000 feet of the panels were interlocked together to form an eight-foot-wide trail. In some cases, the panels were backfilled with gravel; where productive soils still existed, they were left to revegetate naturally. Unimproved parallel routes were blocked with brush to funnel users onto the improved route and allow for natural revegetation.

The last 1,000 feet of bogs before the trail climbs on drier terrain had limited drainage ditches installed but was otherwise left as a control section. "We want to see if this section improves with limited drain work" said Kevin Meyer, the NPS project manager. "And we want people to remember what the trail used to be like."

—KJ Mushovic

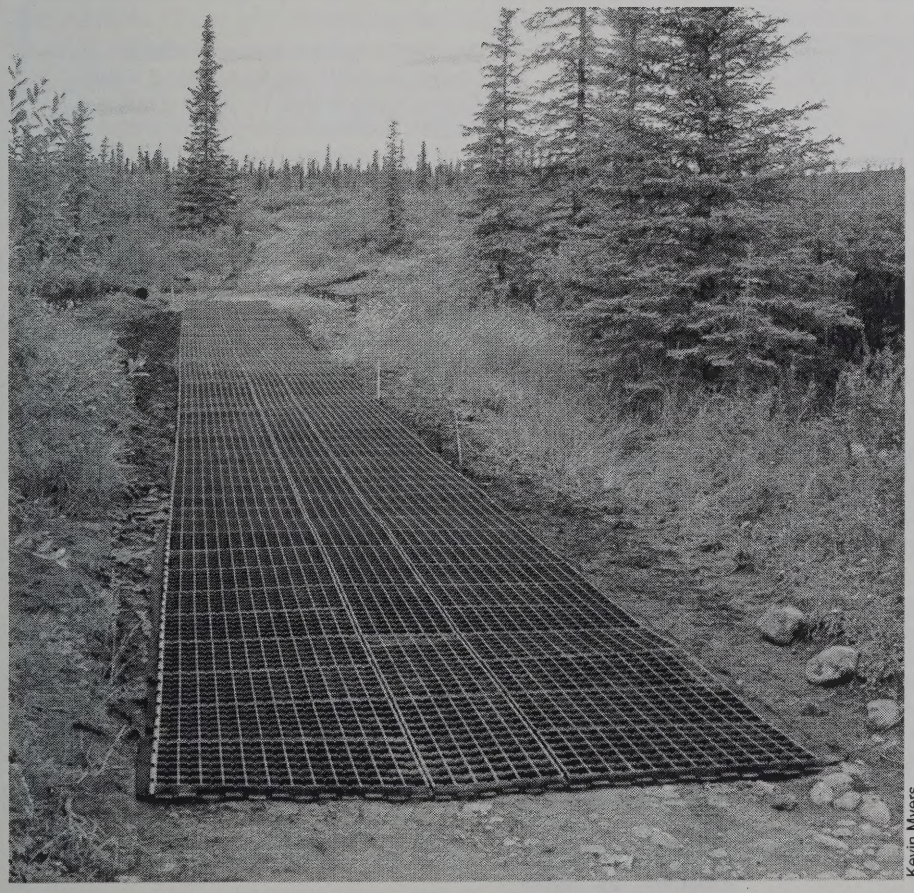
Kevin Myers

Project crew members assemble materials used for trail stabilization (foreground) while other crew members prepare the trail surface for installation.

Jeannie Green Production's "Heartbeat Alaska" program, studying the issue of trail degradation on Alaska Native owned lands in Alaska for an upcoming feature, paid a visit to the project to film part of the installation. State Director Henri Bisson and Glennallen Field Manager Ramone McCoy were on hand to describe how BLM is attempting to address trail damage issues. Green told BLM staff that she may be able to use film footage from the project as an example of what types of alternatives are available for potential application in other rural Alaska locations.

Dennis Green

(above) **Trail braiding and the resulting erosion (on right of photo) will be a thing of the past on the Middle Fork Trail.**
(below) **Freshly-installed gridwork (prior to being covered with dirt and gravel) will prevent off-highway vehicle damage to the trail and surrounding land. In places where productive soils exist, the grid is not filled so vegetation can grow through the openings for a more natural appearance.**



Kevin Myers

Driving Denali, continued from page 5

to do, how much to spend, when we know eventually BLM won't own some of these lands," Bisson added, referring to the State's selection of the Denali Block.

Bisson then invited Johnson to join the group as they hiked the nearby 3,000-foot Hosley Ridge, the site of the first archaeological finds in the area.

Atop the ridge, Johnson and the group searched for stones with sharp edges which might have been used by early Alaskan hunters. Several council members found stones the archaeologist said were "pre-forms," stones early hunters sharpened in the process of making tools.

Council member Paul Roehl of Bristol Bay Native Association was delighted to find the first such artifact. As fellow council members gathered to examine the stone, Jangala confirmed the find. Roehl then asked what he should do with it. Jangala responded, "Put it back exactly where you found it."

"Oh, bummer," said Roehl.

On-the-ground visits to sites such as the Denali Highway and the Tangle Lakes Archaeological District give advisory council members valuable insight into the resources of the area and what those resources mean to the residents who live there. That information and those impressions later factor into the advice and recommendations the council provides to the BLM.

The nine members of the council returned to their homes and jobs with a deeper understanding of the Denali Highway, its rich history and fascinating geology, and the hardy residents who call the area home.

—Teresa McPherson

The next meeting of the Alaska Resource Advisory Council is October 15-16, when the council will discuss its findings of the Denali Highway tour. For more information, contact the BLM at 907.271.3322.

Frontier Flashes

News from around Alaska

September brings not only the fall colors but several opportunities to help show your appreciation for Alaska's public lands and help your public land managers get things ready for winter.

If you live in Anchorage and love the recreation trails at **Campbell Tract**, the BLM invites you to roll up your sleeves and spruce up the trails on **National Public Lands Day, Sept. 28.**

BLM seeks community volunteers to help us give a much-needed facelift to our most popular Campbell Tract trailhead, located at mile 1.1 off Campbell Airstrip Road. We'll replace existing metal fencing along the parking lot with attractive but rustic wood fencing, install new bearproof trash cans, and revegetate a section of streambank near the trailhead where significant erosion from foot traffic has occurred.

No experience is needed. Bring work gloves, a rain jacket, appropriate footwear, and your enthusiasm. BLM will provide tools, equipment and light refreshments. The event is from 9 am until 1 pm and no preregistration is required. For more information, call the Campbell Creek Science Center at 267-1247.

The Campbell Tract is a mostly undeveloped 730-acre parcel of BLM-managed public lands located within the Municipality of Anchorage.

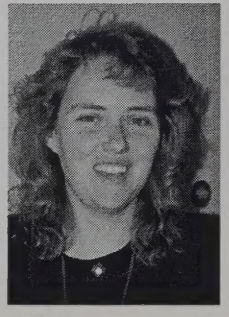
Clean-up Scheduled at Popular Alaska River Access Site: The BLM Anchorage Field Office scheduled a clean-up on August 24th of a popular river access area north of Anchorage. The area accesses the Knik River off the Glenn Highway and is also know as Gravel Pit Lake. The area is contaminated with debris and trash associated with target shooting and fireworks. BLM recently closed the area to these activities. The Department of Transportation, State Fish and Game, and local volunteers will contribute to the effort. This event is associated with National Public Lands Day. **Contact: Jody Weil, 907-271-4418 or Teresa McPherson, 907-271-3322.**

From the BLM photo archives....

Thirty-five years ago, downtown Fairbanks and many parts of Interior Alaska suffered extensive damage from major flooding as the Chena and Tanana rivers overflowed in August 1967.

Frontier People

(left) BLM's national director, **Kathleen Clarke**, visited Alaska for a second time in August. Clark attended a meeting of the National Science Advisory Board and while in Anchorage administered the oath of office to new BLM-Alaska State Director **Henri Bisson**. Clarke said that Bisson was the first state director she named since becoming director and cited Bisson as being "one of the best and the brightest."



(right) **Jody Weil** reported to BLM as the new chief of public affairs. Weil transferred from BLM's Montana State Office in Billings.

(above) Clarke also presented BLM ranger **Ed Lee** a special award to for his service to America following the attack on two U. S. cities last year. Lee served as a sky marshall for six months between October and March.

North Stars show the way to a firefighting career

Two days after completing 40 hours of training, the North Star Fire Crew hit the ground running to their first fire: the Mile Post 78 Fire near Livengood. The fire, near the Elliott Highway between Livengood and Minto, eventually grew to more than 115,000 acres and was still smoldering in late August. For the North Stars, it was the first fire of a busy season.

The North Stars are a Type 2 crew assembled and trained by the Alaska Fire Service. Its purpose is to provide opportunities for Alaskans desiring to become wildland firefighters and to create a more diverse workforce.

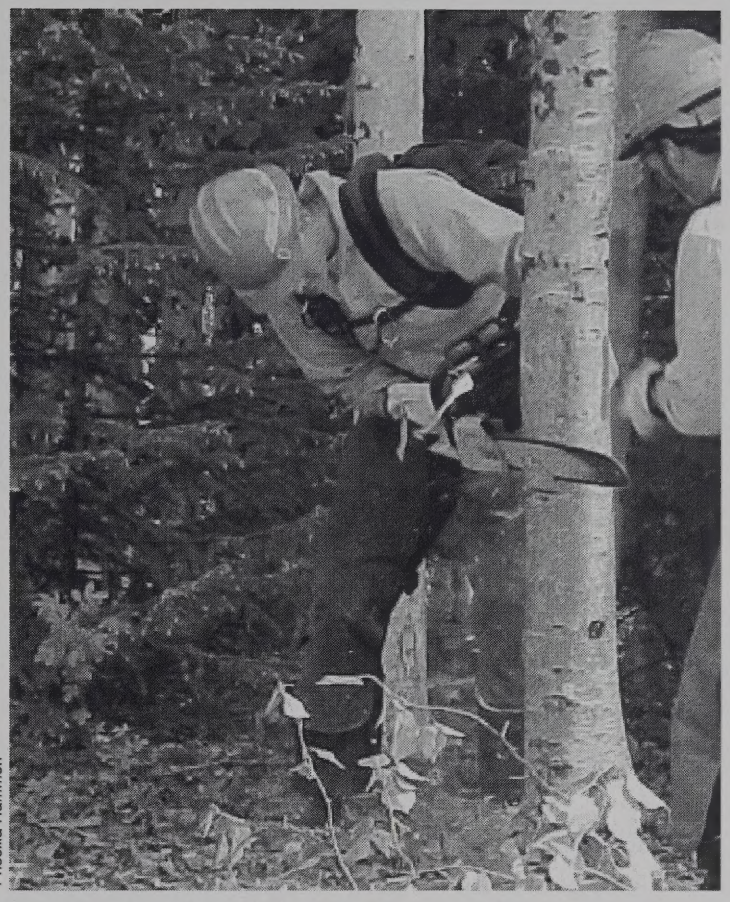
The North Stars began in 1987. Since then they have become a requested, desired crew of choice. Every participant has contributed to their acclaimed status. Members complete 40 hours of unpaid training while housed for a week in the AFS facilities at Fort Wainwright, but they are not paid until they are actually on the fire line.

This year approximately 120 people applied for 20 positions. Twenty of those applicants were women. Approximately half were Alaskans. Few of the North Stars had previous fire experience. "If you make it, we want you to be a hot shot, get trained and move on," said Dave Dash, Chief of Operations for the Alaska Fire Service. "This is not a crew you return to year after year, but a crew that encourages the best candidates to get the training they need to excel as wildland firefighters and become hot shots."

Typically about half the crew become hot shots by the end of the season. Hot shot crews statewide start the season with full staff, but injuries, exhaustion, and family commitments can make it difficult to complete a season. The North Stars make themselves available for the few positions that open up throughout the season.

The North Stars must be physically prepared for a difficult season. To qualify, they must complete a three-mile hike with a 45-pound pack in less than 45 minutes, do seven pull-ups, run a 1.5-mile in 10 minutes 30 seconds or less, and do 25 push-ups and 45 sit-ups, each in 60 seconds or less. These are standards that hot shots crews must conform to nationwide and are more rigorous than the standards for Type 2 crews. Encouraging the North Stars to live up to the same standards in place for more experienced and advanced crews motivates them to excel. AFS looks for past team experiences or indications that these applicants won't shy away from physically difficult work. Applicants must be at least 18 years of age.

Since the North Star Crew began 1987, it has been producing leaders at the Alaska Fire Service and other fire agencies. The current crew boss on the North Stars



Priscilla Hammon

North Star Crew members Lynn Petersen, left, and Nick Simmons, practice tree felling during their 40 hour training course at the start of the season.

is Jason Dollard, who started as a rookie North Star in 1996. "I originally joined because I thought it was a good way to make money for college," he says. Now his job keeps him busy six-to nine months a year. "You focus on time, stress, safety, technique, and fire. You just put your head down and work. The people I work with work beyond a regular workweek. They become your best friends. It's fun!" Now that he is the North Stars leader, he enjoys passing along what he has learned over the years. "The only possible way to improve the opportunity would be to eventually have two crews," he says.

Following the Milepost 78 Fire, the North Stars went to Anchorage to work on the fuels project at Campbell Tract. On July 18 they were dispatched to the Thursday Creek Fire west of Wasilla. The North Stars returned to Fairbanks on July 28, but on Aug. 3 they were deployed again on fires near Lake Minchumina. On Aug. 12, they were still out on the Geskakmina Lake Fire, a 258,000-acre blaze on the Tanana Flats west of Fairbanks.

The North Stars are a great idea that became a better reality. The program creates future hot shots in little time and provides an opportunity for those with little experience. The North Stars are prepared, trained, hard working, and goal oriented—a key building block in the fabric of wildland fire fighting.

—Priscilla Hammon

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